

Stephen: The Martyr with the Face of an Angel

Acts 6:8-15

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It was the early Church Father, Tertullian, who said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church” (*Apologeticum*, 1). This truth was evidenced at the public execution/murder and martyrdom of the faithful Covenanter minister, Donald Cargill, when a 19 year old young man named James Renwick, heard these final words of Cargill just before he was hanged:

I bless the Lord that for all that has been said of me, my conscience does not condemn me. I do not say I am free of sin, but I am at peace with God through a slain Mediator, and I believe that there is no salvation but only in Christ.... I am no more terrified at death, nor afraid of hell, because of sin, than if I had never had sin, for all my sins are freely pardoned and washed thoroughly away, through the precious blood and intercession of Jesus Christ. And I am fully persuaded that this is his way for which I suffer.... Therefore, I entreat you, be not discouraged at the way of Christ, and the cause for which I am to lay down my life, and step into eternity, where my soul shall be as full of him as it can desire to be. And now, this is the sweetest and most glorious day that ever my eyes did see. Now, I entreat you, study to know and believe the Scriptures, which are the truth of God; these have I preached, and do firmly believe them (*No King but Christ*, Maurice Grant, pp. 201,203).

Such a glorious testimony for Christ and His truth so gripped young James Renwick that he soon after committed his life to Christ by choosing to join the persecuted ranks of the Scottish Covenanters. Like Moses he chose to suffer affliction with God’s people rather than enjoy the pleasures of this life and the approval of men. Young Renwick was to join Donald Cargill seven years later in being publicly executed/murdered and martyred as a faithful minister of Jesus Christ at the age of 26 years old.

The enemy of God, the devil, acts as though the blood of the martyrs is the death of the faithful church, but suffering and persecution have always been used by the Lord to point hungry souls to the Lord Jesus Christ—just as the testimony and martyrdom of Stephen (here in Acts 6-7) was the means God used to point Saul of Tarsus to Jesus Christ. The arch-persecutor of the church became the arch-defender of the church as he witnessed the testimony and death of Stephen—a courageous man of faith in Jesus Christ. Let us consider this Lord’s Day how the witness of Stephen was so mightily used by the Lord.

The main points from our text this Lord’s Day are as follows: (1) Stephen: A Godly Man (Acts 6:8); (2) Stephen: A Learned Man (Acts 6:9-14); (3) Stephen: A Transformed Man (Acts 6:15).

I. **Stephen: A Godly Man (Acts 6:8).**

A. Stephen was first introduced to us in Acts 6:5 as one of those men chosen by the congregation and ordained by the apostles to assume the office of deacon within the church in ministering to the needs of the poor widows. As we noted, this was an opportunity for great internal dissension within the church as there arose complaints over the unfair treatment of the Grecian Jewish widows. Satan surely desired that this dissension would grow until it caused God’s people to devour one another with only dry bones left as a faint memory of a once living church. But the Lord turned what might have become divisive into what became unifying as Stephen and the other deacons began to serve the needs of the church, thus allowing the apostles

(as ministers of Christ) to focus their attention on prayer and proclaiming the truths of Jesus Christ. The result was the increase of the church spiritually and numerically (Acts 6:7).

1. Dear ones, how we need the Spirit of God to remind us and to instruct us that the trials in our lives, the dissension in our marriages, and the conflicts in the church may either become that which consume us as we feed on one another (often ignoring our own sins), or may become the means to grow in Christ and produce the fruit of the Spirit in patience.

2. An angry reaction on our parts when trials, disagreements, and clashes come our way will not promote the peace, purity, and unity of either our family or our church. This will only play into the hands of our enemy (Satan). May we rather pause, quiet our hearts before the Lord, and plead with Him that the design of the enemy to divide and conquer would be subdued by Spirit-controlled words and deeds that promote peace, purity, and unity to those with whom we are bound (**James 1:19-20**).

3. In regard to dissension, defensiveness and being so easily offended and sensitive are not our friends, but rather our enemies. How often we are engaged in battles, not over the truth, but rather over our feelings being hurt. Oh, how we need thick skin and a tender heart that the peace, purity, and unity of our families and of our church may be promoted and preserved. As young, faithful James Renwick wrote in one of his letters: "Let us be lions in God's cause, and lambs in our own" (*Life and Letters of James Renwick*, W.H. Carslaw, p.35).

B. The testimony of Stephen was mighty because he was a godly man.

1. Stephen had a reputation and name among his brethren of being "of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom" (Acts 6:3).

a. Solomon says that "a good name is rather to be chosen than great riches" (Proverbs 22:1). Solomon does not say "a popular name", or "a funny name", or "a pompous name", but "a good name", "a pure name", "a humble name", "an honest name".

b. The general report among the brethren concerning Stephen was that he was honest, faithful, loyal, and true to Christ and His commandments. What is the general report about you beginning with your family, then with the church and your work? Stephen was dependable—not all over the map—one day here, one day there. There was a consistency in his faith and practice (not perfection, but consistency).

2. He was a man that was "full of faith" (Acts 6:5,8).

a. To be "full of" or to be "filled with" does not mean that nothing more could be added (as if he had attained to the highest measure of faith), but rather it means that Stephen was controlled by his faith in Christ and in His Word ("full of wickedness" Leviticus 19:29; "full of tossings to and fro" Job 7:4; "full of confusion" Job 10:15; "full of new wine" Acts 2:13; "full of mercy and good fruits" James 3:17). It was not his thoughts and feelings, or his lusts and pleasures that controlled him; nor was it the thoughts and feelings of others that controlled him; but it was his faith in Jesus Christ and in the commandments of Christ that controlled him. It was not his fears and worries that controlled him, but rather his faith in his almighty Savior who could do him no wrong.

b. Dear ones, it is not the size of your faith that is the primary issue here, but rather the size of the God in whom your faith is placed. You see, Jesus says that even one with the faith of a mustard seed (which is the smallest among seeds) can say to that mountain (whether a it be a king, or a kingdom, or an affliction, or a temptation/sin, or a fear), "Be cast into the sea" (Matthew 17:20). How big is your God in your thoughts and meditations throughout the day? That is how big will be your faith. I'm not talking about what you merely confess by way of a statement of belief about God, but rather the thoughts you actually entertain and feast on about the greatness and glory of the God who created you and saved you and provides for all your needs.

c. Faith is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8), but it is also a gift that is to be exercised

daily as you account that to be true which God says is true about you (you are crucified with Christ, you are raised to new life with Christ, you are seated in heavenly places with Christ—Romans 6; Ephesians 2:6). Faith is taking God at His Word in regard to your sin and his forgiveness (1 John 1:9). Faith is looking outside yourself to Christ for His righteousness (it is like an eye). Faith is standing with the few who faithfully follow Christ, even when the multitude, even when family and friends turn away from what is faithful and true (**Hebrews 11:24-26**). Faith is not walking by sight (like Thomas), but by the “thus saith the Lord”. Stephen was full of and controlled by his faith in the Lord God who could not fail him. Do you earnestly desire to be full of faith? What are you doing to become full of faith—controlled by your faith in Christ?

3. Stephen was “full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom” (Acts 6:3,5) and was therefore “full of power” (Acts 6:8).

a. Again this means that Stephen was **controlled by the Holy Spirit, controlled by wisdom, and controlled by the power** that came from the Almighty Spirit of God. To be controlled by the Holy Spirit is the fountain from which wisdom and power come. To seek wisdom and power apart from being controlled by the Spirit is fruitless and futile. The Spirit of God is the source—wisdom is applying God’s Word to your practical life and power is overcoming the enemies of God—these are the fruit.

b. Being “full of the Holy Ghost” does not mean that Stephen had more of the Holy Spirit than you have (for the Holy Spirit being God cannot be divided into parts); it is more the case that the Holy Spirit had more of Stephen than He has of you and me. For when we are daily giving ourselves in all of our tragedies, calamities, heartaches, trials, isolation, afflictions, and tribulations to Christ to use us; when we are praying “not my will, but thine be done”; the Spirit of God more and more controls us. The more that Jesus Christ consciously occupies the throne of your life, the more His blessed Spirit controls your life and grows you in fullness of wisdom and power.

c. In giving ourselves daily as living sacrifices to Christ, **the wisdom** that the Holy Spirit grows in us is described in **James 3:17**. When you pray for wisdom, this is what you are praying for. This was the heavenly wisdom the Stephen evidenced in his speech and conduct.

d. In giving ourselves daily as living sacrifices to Christ, **the power** that the Holy Spirit grows in us is that by which we stand courageously for Christ and against whatever the enemies of God throw against us. Stephen was given by God the gracious gift of performing miracles like the apostles (Acts 6:8), but the power that God gives more ordinarily to Christians is the power to be a courageous, faithful witness, beginning in our own homes and with our own families (often times that is where our testimony for Christ is tested most severely—because we “let down our hair” there—and yet that is where God calls us to especially live our Christian life—like the demoniac that was delivered wanted to follow Jesus, but Jesus sent him back home, **Mark 5:18-19**). Even when we suffer according to the will of God and look to His grace to sustain us, it is the power of God’s Spirit working in and through us (**2 Corinthians 12:8-10**).

II. Stephen: A Learned Man (Acts 6:9-14).

A. In this section concerning Stephen, we move from his godly character to his knowledge of God’s Word.

1. Because he was full of the Holy Ghost, full of faith, full of wisdom, and full of power, he was able to stand courageously before those who opposed Christ and hated Christ. Courage is not the absence of fear—it is simply fearing God more than you fear man. But what would Stephen have to defend and to bear testimony to if he was not thoroughly learned in the doctrine and teaching of the Holy Scriptures? He may not have had a formal theological education, but he was a learned man in the doctrine of the Scriptures. In Acts 7, it will become clear how much time he had spent feasting upon the doctrine of God’s gracious covenant with His people throughout redemptive history.

2. Stephen had the armor of a warrior for Christ, but without a firm and settled knowledge

of the doctrine of Scripture, he would not have had a sword with which to pierce the hearts of those Jews from the Grecian synagogue with whom he debated (Acts 6:9-10). Dear ones, there is no wisdom where there is no knowledge of the truth. Wisdom is the application of God's Word to every area of life (**2 Timothy 3:16-17**). Remember that when you pray for wisdom.

B. As is often the case when the truth and the wisdom of God cannot be overcome in a faithful witness, lies, slander, and misrepresentation of what is believed and taught is the secret weapon brought out to take down those who courageously stand and will not back down though an host encamp against them.

1. Here in Acts 6:11-14, false witnesses are suborned (bribed) to testify against Stephen; first before those of the synagogue of Grecian Jews; and then before the Council or Sanhedrin (the Jewish Supreme Court). It was not so much that the false witnesses were totally misrepresenting Stephen's position. For it is likely that Stephen did in fact teach that Jesus had prophesied that the temple would be destroyed and that the outward administration of worship had changed with the coming of Christ. It was the false conclusions that they drew and brought against Stephen that made them false witnesses—"blasphemous words against Moses, and against God" (Acts 6:11)—"This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law" (Acts 6:13). Stephen is following in the footsteps of Jesus who endured the same false testimony from bribed witnesses. When you testify for Christ, you, too, will be slandered, misrepresented, and lied about. It comes with being a witness for Jesus Christ.

2. Dear ones, let us not take the words of people out of context. Let us not put our own spin on the words of others. Let us not misrepresent what others say. Let us not draw false conclusions from the views of others (beginning in the home, then on the internet, in the church, at the workplace). When we do so, we condemn ourselves as false witnesses and accusers of the brethren (in aiding and abetting Satan).

III. Stephen: A Transformed Man (Acts 6:15).

A. This is a remarkable statement! Whether Stephen's face was actually illuminated like that of Moses or Christ (as some commentators believe) or whether Stephen's countenance was so at peace and so under the control of the Holy Spirit as all the fiery darts of the enemy were hurled against him (being completely composed as if he had an angel's face as other commentators maintain), there was something so evident about the countenance of Stephen that silenced his critics ("And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him").

1. Having attacked him with the heaviest of their lying artillery, there he sat silently, beaming a confidence in Christ, a peace of God that passes all understanding, a knowledge of God's immutable love for him, and a power that spoke through his countenance to the effect, "You act as though you are judging me, but in reality you are the ones who are being judged before the tribunal of my Almighty, Sovereign God. You are guilty. I am forgiven and righteous through the obedience and sacrifice of Jesus Christ." As the young, faithful martyr for Jesus Christ, James Renwick, wrote in another of his letters: "And when the world frowns most, I know, it is the time wherein the Lord smiles most upon His own" (*Life and Letters of James Renwick*, W.H. Carlsaw, p.130). This was the reason for the face of the angel that appeared upon Stephen.

2. Oh, dear ones, how this silent angelic face needs to be more evidenced in your life and mine in the midst of attacks, pressures, stresses, fears, and worries which like a tidal wave would seem to crush us. That angelic countenance speaks volumes that God is in control, not man—therefore, you can rest and relax in your Savior (**Genesis 50:20**). Dear brothers and sisters, the face of an angel was manifest in the countenance of Stephen because he was "full of the Holy Ghost" (controlled by the Holy Spirit), "full of faith" (controlled by his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ), "full of wisdom" (controlled by the wisdom that comes from

above), and “full of power” (controlled by the power of the Holy Spirit). As you grow in this “fullness”, you, too, will shine forth that angelic countenance of peace as you are assailed, rather than lashing back with vindictive and violent speech and conduct. The more that the Holy Spirit has of you, the more He will shine His light through you.

As I close today, I want you to see that Stephen (though a godly, learned, and transformed man of God) did not immediately see the fruit of his labor. Even though giving a powerful testimony to the truth and power of Christ, that testimony only hardened the Sanhedrin to the point that they dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death as a blasphemer deserving of death. However, there was likely in the synagogue of the Grecian Jews in Acts 6:9 (Cilicia of which Tarsus is the capital) a young man by the name of Saul of Tarsus who heard the testimony of Stephen (Acts 7:58; Acts 8:1). Stephen became the link to the Apostle Paul. One single man with whom the truth was initially rejected and who became the great persecutor of the church almost certainly heard the powerful testimony of Stephen, and was converted by the power of Christ at just that moment in time appointed from all eternity by our gracious, sovereign God (through the ministry of Paul the gospel spread throughout the world—we are among the Gentiles that have been brought to Christ through the ministry of Paul).

Beloved, do not lose hope in your witness to your family, to wayward children, to friends, to co-workers, for that testimony for the truth and that angelic countenance when under attack may be the very means God uses to draw the rebellious unto himself (Matthew 5:16).

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